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ABSTRACT

Many studies report severe role overload problems for spouses and particularly for the wives in dual-career families; whether this overload is perceived by subjects themselves or by the researchers is not always clear. To clarify the overwork issue, the perceptions of university faculty women (N=151) regarding their career and domestic work loads were investigated. Subjects estimated the time they spent on their professions, their households, and their families, and judged to what degree they felt overworked. All subjects, who were divided into four groups according to their marital and motherhood status, reported working many hours per week, with mothers working considerably more (over 100 hours per week) than childless women (over 70 hours per week). However, none of the subjects reported feeling particularly overworked. If professional women with families are not aware of, or do not admit to, being overworked, they may not attempt to alleviate pressure which could have serious implications for their families, parenting, and career development. (NRB)

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Are Professional Women Overworked?

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Abstract

One hundred fifty one faculty women at Northwestern University were studied. The focus was on their estimation of the time they spend on their professions, their housework and their families and about their feelings of being overworked. The subjects were divided into four groups according to their marital and motherhood status. All subjects reported working many hours per week with the ones that have children working considerably more (over 100 hours per week) than the childless ones (over 70 hours per week). However, all four groups of subjects did not report feeling particularly overworked, and within our sample mothers who reported that they work more hours did not report feeling more overworked. The paper also offers possible explanations and implications of this phenomena.

ARE PROFESSIONAL WOMEN OVERWORKED?

A major concern many researchers of dual career families and professional women share is the considerable role strain and simple lack of time these people experience. Many studies report severe role overload problems for both spouses and particularly for the wives in dual career families. However, in these studies it is not always clear whether a) the subjects themselves reported that they feel overworked, or b) the researchers feel that overwork is a consequence of their subjects' lifestyle. This paper tries to help clarify this overwork issue by separating the two notions.

The Study

This study investigates the perceptions of a group of university faculty women about their work loads, i.e. career and domestic work.

Subjects for the study were 151 women on the faculty at Northwestern University. The women were asked to estimate the number of hours they spend on their professions, their households, and their families, and to judge whether and to what degree they feel overworked. They were also asked about their attitudes toward different aspects in a working woman's life; e.g., can she be a good wife, a good mother and feminine?

Results and Discussion

Subjects were divided into four groups according to their marital and motherhood status: two groups of married women - 51 without children

and 56 who have children in their current household; two groups of unmarried women i.e. single, separated, divorced and/or widowed - 40 without children and 4 who are mothers of children living with them currently.

The subjects were asked how many hours per week they devote to their professions. The mean response was 51.74. The fact that married women with children at home reported spending at least five hours a week less on their professional work than did women in any of the other categories may be due to their greater responsibilities at home. By the same reasoning, of course, unmarried women with children at home should also have reported spending fewer hours a week on professional work. They did not. However, because the number of unmarried women with children is too small to yield a dependable mean (only four subjects in this group) this fact cannot be interpreted. Married women without children reported spending the greatest number of hours per week on their career.

Subjects were also asked how much time per week they spend on domestic work (housework and child care). The mean response was 35.87 hours. When this is added to the time spent on professional work, the total is 85.61. Women faculty respondents thus reported, on the average, that they work the equivalent in hours of two fulltime jobs. Among the women without children at home, the unmarried subjects spent an average of five hours more a week on domestic work than the married ones. Perhaps the intuitive explanation is correct--husbands help; i.e., married women may be able to spend less time on housework and more time on career because husbands share some of the domestic burden.

For women with children at home, one message is abundantly clear:

having kids is a lot of work. Married women with children reported working the equivalent in hours of almost three fulltime jobs, over 108 hours per week. Again, the number of unmarried women with children is too small to make inferences worthwhile. (All these numbers appear in Table 1 in the attached Appendix.)

The women were asked, "How often do you feel overloaded or overworked because of your job and other responsibilities?" Answers were to be marked on the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
very seldom (once a month or less)		often (once a week)		regularly (almost every day)

For the whole sample, the mean response was 3.0. Considering that these are women who, by their own estimation, worked an average of more than 87 hours a week, this response seems low. We would at least expect scores on this item to reflect, in a relative way, the hours of work reported: that is, women who reported that they work more hours should also have felt more overworked. Surprisingly, this is not consistently so. Married women with children, by their own report working well over 100 hours a week, felt no more overloaded than did married women without children, who reported working about 72 hours a week. (All these numbers appear in Table 2 in the attached Appendix.)

One possible explanation is that mothers do not perceive time they devote to childcare as work. Perhaps mothers view childcare not as work but as something they want to do and enjoy. If the hours devoted to

childcare are subtracted, mean total work hours per week for married mothers is 72.88, very similar to the means for other groups in the sample. It is no surprise, then, that their subjective perception of their overload is not greater than the other groups in the sample. Indirect support for this interpretation comes from the following results: while 11% of the mothers reported that they do less than their share of housework, only 3% (two mothers) reported that they do less than their share of childcare. Similarly, while 46% of the mothers felt that they need more help with housework, only 5% (three cases) felt that they need more help with childcare. It seems likely that mothers feel they do less than their share of and need more help with things they enjoy less--i.e., housework; and tney do their share and need less help with things they enjoy more--i.e., childcare.

Another possible explanation for the phenomenon that overload scores do not reflect hours of work reported may be that these mothers take for granted that having chosen the dual rewards of career and family means having very little time for themselves and they ought to be able to accept the dual burdens without complaint. Perhaps their ideals about combining career and family are such that to admit that they are overburdened would be an admission of failure or inadequacy. Support for this interpretation comes from the fact that all subjects, but especially mothers, have very high ideals about combining career and family. They feel that they can be successful in their career, feminine, good mothers and have happy marriages, all that without being overworked.

The women were asked to express their opinions on different aspects

of working women's lives on a scale from one to four, with four representing the most positive response. All subjects strongly agree that women can be feminine and professionally successful. There were no significant differences among the groups on this item. All subjects also strongly agree that professional women can have happy marriages. The group of married and childless women scored on this item significantly higher than all three other groups at the .05 level.

It is interesting to note that on the statement about working women being good mothers, the mothers scored significantly higher than the other two groups of nonmothers at the .05 level. This result indicated that mothers set for themselves higher ideals regarding motherhood than the other groups. The findings about mothers doing their share of and needing less help with childcare, might explain why they have such a positive opinion and feel that they are as good mothers as nonworking mothers.

All subjects disagreed with the statement saying that being overworked is inevitable for a working woman who has a family. However, the mothers disagreed more strongly than the married and childless. A t-test indicated that the difference between the two groups was significant at the .05 level. The unmarried mothers' disagreement score with this statement was even stronger; however, the number of subjects in this group is too small (only four subjects) to yield a dependable mean and their score cannot be interpreted. (All these numbers appear in Table 3 in the attached Appendix.)

It should be emphasized that all our variables were measured by

self report. We do not know, for example, that married women with children at home in fact worked an average 108 hours a week. But this consideration, if anything, makes our findings even more perplexing.

Although our data are subjective, they suggest the disturbing possibility that professional women who choose to have families pay a high price of which they are not aware. If people are not aware of or do not admit that they are overworked they will not attempt to take measures that will alleviate this pressure. We know from other studies that continuous pressure can lead to stress and to the negative consequences associated with it and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to function successfully and adequately under continuous pressure. These superwomen's achievement in their career, family, or both might not hold on for a long term under such conditions. These women's pressure, although not admitted, has serious implications for their families, parenting and career development. It is an issue that career counselors as well as psychotherapists should be aware of when advising women.

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Table 1

Mean Hours Worked Per Week

	Professional Work	Domestic Work	Total	N
Unmarried, no children	53.49	23.46	76.95	39
Married, no children	55.63	18.46	72.14	50
Unmarried, children	54.50	45.75	100.25	4
Married, children	48.55	59.76 (35.12)*	108.31	55
Missing				3
Total	51.74	35.87	87.61	151

* The number in parentheses represents hours devoted to children as part of hours devoted to domestic work.

Table 2

Perceptions of Overwork

	Mean Overwork Rating	N
Unmarried, no children	3.10	39
Married, no children	2.94	50
Unmarried, children	3.25	4
Married, children	2.96	55
Missing		3
Total	3.00	151

Table 3

Attitudes About Career Women

	Mean Agreement Scores			
	Married With Children	Unmarried With Children	Married No Children	Unmarried No Children
1. A woman can be successful in a career and feminine.	3.78	3.89	3.73	3.78
2. Working women's marriages are as happy as nonworking women's	3.61	3.55	3.91	3.64
3. Working mothers can establish as warm and secure a relationship with their children as can nonworking mothers.	3.45	3.77	3.22	3.21
4. Being overworked is inevitable for a working woman who has a family.	2.05	1.55	2.29	1.93